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Reagan turns up the heat on aid for the Contras

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The number of Nicaraguan resistance fighters would quadruple with U.S. military assistance, a State Department official said yesterday, as the administration turned up the heat on Congress to approve \$100 million in rebel aid.

President Reagan met at the White House yesterday with resistance leaders to discuss his proposal for \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in humanitarian assistance for the rebel cause.

The leaders, all members of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, included Adolfo Calero, head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force; Arturo Cruz, a former Sandinista ambassador to Washington; and Alfonso Robelo, a member of the original Sandinista junta that took power in 1979.

There are 19,000 potential recruits ready to join 6,000 active resistance fighters in Nicaragua if the United States provides military equipment and supplies, said Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs.

"They are waiting for us to supply them and they will be happy to go in and fight," Mr. Abrams said at a White House briefing. "They're ready and willing and waiting for us to help make them able."

At the same time, the administration estimates that the number of rebels fighting Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista regime has dwindled from 8,000 to 6,000 within the past three months, due to supply shortages.

Congress last year approved only \$27 million in humanitarian assistance to the Nicaraguan resistance. The aid will expire at the end of this month.

"Congressional defeat of this aid proposal could well deliver Nicaragua permanently to the communist bloc," Mr. Reagan told supporters of his proposal at the White House.

"Procrastination risks a military victory for the Sandinistas who hope to finish off the freedom fighters before American help can arrive," the president said.

On Capitol Hill, Senate Assistant Majority Leader Alan Simpson said the president's request for aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels

is "a good prospect" for winning congressional approval.

Mr. Simpson, Wyoming Republican, said

for the proposed package to pass, however, Mr. Reagan must take the lead in convincing Congress and the American people that the \$100 million request is vital to U.S. security interests.

"It is something just a little bit imponderable to the American people," said Mr. Simpson, who predicted the president would soon make a national television address on economic and military aid to the rebels.

"He definitely has to be part of it to [provide] basic understanding and support," Mr. Simpson said.

Mr. Abrams said 25,000 people both inside and outside Nicaragua have volunteered to fight the Sandinista regime. About 6,000 already are engaged in active combat.

He said his estimates come from "good contacts" in Central America.

Most of the 25,000 have rifles but lack basic supplies such as boots and food, he said.

Mr. Abrams said with 25,000 resistance fighters in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas would be "spread thin." The Sandinista government has 60,000 army troops and 60,000 in its militia, he said.

Mr. Cruz, one of the rebel leaders who met with Mr. Reagan yesterday, told the president that only military pressure would bring the Sandinistas to the negotiating table.

"The only way we will ever persuade them is through pressure," Mr. Cruz said. "We have courageous young men who are willing to stand up for this principle."

Mr. Abrams acknowledged that there have been problems channeling aid to the resistance forces this year, because other countries in the region have been uncooperative.

"There are a large number of people in Latin America and Central

America who are interested in helping restore democracy to Nicaragua, but they're also scared of the Sandinista military buildup," he said. "They would like to cooperate in a somewhat more discrete manner than we through Congress permit them to cooperate. That's the problem."

Mr. Reagan has asked Congress to allow the new aid to be administered by the agency he chooses, including the CIA, which Congress last year barred from distributing the money.

Mr. Abrams said a more covert program would ease the fears of countries in the region that want to cooperate.

"What they're afraid of is very simple: They're afraid we're going

to walk away from this and leave them facing a communist government armed to the teeth by the Soviets and Cubans, which will then take out after them," he said.

Meanwhile, Sen. Jim Sasser, who returned yesterday from a three-day trip to four Central American countries, said leaders in nations neighboring Nicaragua are "frustrated" with efforts to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

But Mr. Sasser, Tennessee Democrat, said he would sponsor a bill to hold in an escrow account for six months the \$70 million in aid requested by Mr. Reagan, a move he predicted would help encourage the Sandinista government to begin negotiations toward a peaceful settlement.

Mr. Sasser said the leaders of the four countries — Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica — told him that "pressure must be applied to the Sandinistas" to force them into a negotiated settlement.

He said none of the four leaders endorsed the president's aid request, but none disagreed with the proposal aimed at stepping up negotiations, known as the Contadora process. Mr. Sasser said he attempted to meet with leaders of the Sandinista government in Managua, but "they were all in Moscow or Cuba."

"I can report to you that there is a general frustration with the failure of Contadora to, thus far, achieve progress toward peace," Mr. Sasser said. "In fact, there is a growing concern that time is running out. But I would emphasize there is still a considerable measure of hope that peace can be achieved."

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Mr. Sasser, who previously opposed military aid to the insurgent forces, said he is unsure how he will vote when the president's request comes to the Senate floor.

Under Mr. Sasser's proposed measure, \$30 million would be provided immediately for humanitarian aid, but the \$70 million would be held for six months. During that time, he said, the United States would accelerate peace talks, suspend planned military exercises in Honduras and encourage the rebel forces to call a six-month cease-fire.

In return for those concessions, he said, the Sandinistas would be encouraged to honor the cease-fire accord, suspend all shipments of military equipment from Soviet bloc countries into Nicaragua and enter the negotiating process.

Mr. Sasser said should negotiations fail, "the hammer would fall" and the military assistance from the United States would automatically be sent after the six-month period.